DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 043 622 TE 002 048

AUTHOR	Hands, Charles B.
TITLE	The Levels of "Rappaccini's Daughter."
INSTITUTION	Maryland Council of Teachers of English, College Park.
PUB DATE	70
NOTE	8p.
JOURNAL CIT	Maryland English Journal; v8 n2 p3-10 Spr 1970
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.50
DESCRIPTORS	Ambiguity, *American Literature, Characterization (Literature), Complexity Level, Irony, *Literary Analysis, Moral Values, Nineteenth Century Literature, Secondary Education, *Short Stories, *Symbols (Literary)
IDENTIFIERS	Hawthorne (Nathaniel), *Rappaccinis Daughter

ABSTRACT

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Rappaccini's Daughter" reflects the author's view that inherent in the human dilemma are ambiguous ironies which cannot be resolved. Although Hawthorne (unlike Ralph Waldo Emerson) perceives evil as an extraordinarily potent force, he offers no clear moral solutions in this story, but examines various dimensions of the problem of evil. The story concerns the blighted love of two beautiful "innocents," while the theme raises the question of which is real, appearance or substance, by simultaneously developing a sense of physical voluptuousness and spiritual love. The idyllic garden with its central poisonous shrub and life-nourishing fountain provides a traditional setting for the four characters, each of whom is enmeshed in his own sin. The moral tangle is clarified, but not resolved, when Beatrice is killed by an antidote she takes to rid herself of her "inherited" poison. Each of the three men in the story is guilty of her death, though each has acted in good faith--Rappaccini, because he experiments with human beings to add to his scientific knowledge; Giovanni, because he urges the fatal antidote on Beatrice to perfect her; and Dr. Baglioni, because he eagerly provides the antidote in a fit of professional jealousy for Rappaccini. (DB)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Maryland English Journal,
Vol. 8, No. 2, Spring 1970

The Levels of "Rappaccini's Daughter"

CHARLES B. HANDS[1]

ED043622

Dr. Hands served as project director for a federally-funded institute (1968-1969) focusing on A Variety of Critical Approaches to Modern American Literature. The article which follows exemplifies one of these critical methods – the formalistic.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON had no doubt that the poet had access to truth. "The poet alone knows astronomy, chemistry, vegetation and animation," he wrote. "He knows why the plain or meadow of space was strown with these flowers we call suns and moons and stars; why the great deep is adorned with animals, with men, and gods; for in every word he speaks he rides on them as the horses of thought."[2] And again: "He is the true and only doctor; he knows and tells; he is the only teller of news, for he was present and privy to the appearance which he describes."[3]

Hawthorne was not quite so sure. He had gone to Brook Farm and come back disillusioned. Transcendentialism did not square with the basically Puritan strain of his blood: man was the inheritor of original sin, was at best limited and deficient—a transgressor torn by guilt and wracked by the stirrings of a pride which drove him to ruin by enticing him toward a perfection which was alien to his nature. Man, far from being Emerson's "creator in the finite,"[4] was a lost and bewildered creature. Hence, regarding Emerson: ". . . there had been epochs in my life when I, too, might have asked of this prophet the master word that should solve me the riddle of the universe; but now, being happy, I felt as if there were no questions to be put, and therefore admired Emerson as a poet of deep beauty and austere tenderness, but sought nothing from him as a philosopher."[5]

TE 002 048

[1]Chairman, Department of English, Loyola College, Baltimore, Maryland

[2]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Modern Library College Edition, Random House, New York, 1950, p. 329. All quotations from Emerson will be from this edition.
[3]"The Poet," p. 322.
[4]*Nature*, p. 36.
[5]Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Old Manse," *Selected Tales and Sketches*, Rinehart Editions, Rinehart and Co., Inc., New York, 1958, p. 397. Unless otherwise noted all quotations from Hawthorne will be from this edition.

Copyright, Maryland Council of Teachers of English, 1970

The Puritans in their efforts to know the divine plan through sources other than the Bible had suggested a much more modest approach than Emerson's—the approach of typology—but Hawthorne had reservations about even this. Falling stars and earthquakes might be signs of God's displeasure, and the rose rising from the thorny stem might be a sign that a life of vicissitude can terminate in beauty, but how could one be sure? The signs are too ambiguous, the meanings too obscure. In life "you emerge from mystery, pass through a vicissitude that you can but imperfectly control, and are borne onward to another mystery."[6] The experience and vision of one man are different from the experience and vision of another. Everyone looks at the world from a different angle and sees it in a light which, different as it may be from everyone else's, is true for him.

Hawthorne, then, is unable to view life simply; he insists on seeing it from a variety of vantage points, many of which have their own validity even while remaining mutually exclusive. As was almost inevitable, his view that life is ambiguously complex leads him to produce an art which is equally ambiguous and complex. "Rappaccini's Daughter" is a case in point.

During the past several years "Rappaccini's Daughter" has been the subject of a great deal of perceptive criticism—so much so that a number of heretofore pervasive misreadings are no longer tenable. For example, one can no longer accept the view that the story is simply another of Hawthorne's statements about the evil which attends man's lust for knowledge.[7] Dr. Rappaccini is not the focal point of the story. Beatrice does not stand alone at the center either, however, and it is not sufficient to view the story as a dramatization of Hawthorne's belief that pure spirit can transcend impure flesh.[8] I would suggest, instead, that the story, rather than offering an answer to a moral problem, concerns itself primarily with presenting the complex dimensions of the problem itself, the answer to which is not simple and perhaps, in Hawthorne's view of the world, not even possible.

In its most obvious form, "Rappaccini's Daughter" is a story of blighted love. Its ingredients are almost classic: Beatrice, the pure and beautiful girl sheltered from contact with the rest of humanity by her parents, accidentally meets and falls in love with Giovanni,

[6]Hawthorne, "The Haunted Mind," p. 325.

[7]One of the pioneer accounts of this is Hyatt H. Waggoner, *Hawthorne*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1955, pp. 101-17.

[8]This is the general theory set forth by Waggoner. It is also developed by, among others, Roy R. Male, *Hawthorne's Tragic Vision*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1956, and Richard Harter Fogle, *Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and the Dark*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1952.

the weak but handsome young man whose virtue she overestimates at the cost of her life. Throughout the story the emphasis is placed upon spirit, however. We are told at the very beginning that "Guasconti had not a deep heart."[9] Despite this: "they had looked love with eyes that conveyed the holy secret from the depths of one soul into the depths of the other . . . ; they had even spoken love in those gushes of passion when their spirits darted forth . . . "[10]The final scene is also essentially spiritual. Giovanni's "spirit was incapable of sustaining itself at the height to which the early enthusiasm of passion had exalted it; he fell down grovelling among earthly doubts, and defiled therewith the pure whiteness of Beatrice's image."[11] To be sure, it is the contagious poison which triggers the catastrophe, but the narrator insists that his reader place the events into their proper perspective: "O, weak, and selfish, and unworthy spirit, that could dream of an earthly union and earthly happiness as possible after such deep love had been so bitterly wronged as Beatrice's by Giovanni's blighting words!"[12]

The repeated emphasis upon the spiritual aspects of the love story suggests that the story may be a convenient center around which Hawthorne can group other problems of the spirit. This suggestion is reinforced by the fantastic nature of the plot. Blighted love alone surely is not adequate to account for what must be the worst case of halitosis in all of American literature. The strain which the plot puts on the reader's credibility is almost intolerable even if one keeps in mind Hawthorne's famous distinction between the novel and the romance.[13] As we push further into the story, perhaps it will be helpful to keep separate from one another several additional layers of meaning, even though these layers frequently impinge and interact on one another.

In addition to being a love story "Rappaccini's Daughter" is a story of appearance vs. reality. What is to be believed about the world? Can one believe what he sees, or are appearances too deceiving? Beatrice, for example, is not entirely what she seems to be. Viewed in one way, she has great physical beauty. Her voluptuousness is repeatedly called to our attention; Hawthorne's description of her initial entrance sets the tone for the rest of the story: "Soon there emerged . . . the figure of a young girl, arrayed with as much richness of taste as the most splendid of the flowers, beautiful as the day, and with a bloom so deep and vivid that one shade more would have been too much. She looked redundant with

[9]"Rappaccini," p. 279.
[10]"Rappaccini," p. 288.
[11]"Rappaccini," p. 292.
[12]"Rappaccini," p. 297.
[13]cf. Hawthorne's brief Preface to *The House of Seven Gables.*

life, health, and energy; all of which attributes were bound down and compressed, as it were, and girdled tensely, in their luxuriance, by her virgin zone."[14]

Viewed in a different way, her physical appearance has to be ignored in favor of the "real" reality [whatever that means] which lurks inside her and which is, of course, incapable of being observed. Giovanni is quite willing to accept this second view despite the evidences of his own senses. Beatrice has urged him: "Forget whatever you may have fancied in regard to me. If true to the outward senses, still it may be false in its essence . . ."[15] Giovanni has acceded to her request. He has seen the insects die and the flowers wilt, yet these incidents "dissolving in the pure light of her character, had no longer the efficacy of facts, but were acknowledged as mistaken fantasies, by whatever testimony of the senses they might appear to be substantiated."[16]It is precisely Giovanni's willingness to discredit appearance which leads him to seek out Beatrice in her own garden.

Giovanni's faith here has not been adequately emphasized by critics, who usually see him only as the weakling whose spirit is unable to accept Beatrice *in toto*. But in some sense who can blame him for reacting violently? If Dr. Rappaccini is blameworthy for poisoning Beatrice, is not Beatrice blameworthy for her miscalculation in poisoning Giovanni, accidental as it may have been? Giovanni has taken her at her word, and although her physical poison may be only "appearance," that appearance is unquestionably real enough to poison Giovanni, and his poisoning ultimately leads to his attempt to cure her with the antidote that kills her. It would appear, then, that Giovanni's decision to ignore physical appearance and snatch at spiritual reality is fatal.

This interpretation of appearance vs. reality is too simple, however, for if it is true that Giovanni's refusal to admit the validity of appearance leads indirectly to Beatrice's death, it is also true that the direct cause of Beatrice's death stems from Giovanni's decision that he no longer can ignore the poison (the appearance) and thus must ask Beatrice to take the antidote with him. So what should one believe? If one credits the physical reality he may be deceived about the spirit; if one credits the spiritual reality he may be deceived about the physical. Which "reality" is real? Perhaps at various times both of them are. One of the disconcerting aspects of life is that one cannot know definitely what is appearance and what is reality. Worse, the appearance might kill you, and so might the

[14]"Rappaccini," p. 271.
[15]"Rappaccini," pp. 284-85.
[16]"Rappaccini," p. 292.

reality, so even if you can tell them apart, which one do you choose?

The appearance-reality theme is deepened and made more intense by being given a moral dimension. Part of this dimension is traditional and therefore relatively easy to cope with: the symbolic significance of the garden, for example, with its central poisonous shrub, and of the fountain which fills the pool and gives nourishment to the poisonous plant. Giovanni immediately identifies this fountain as "an immortal spirit" which, oblivious to its surroundings, "sung its song unceasingly" as it "continued to gush and sparkle into the sunbeams."[17]

Beatrice is clearly associated with the shrub. She is the only one who can breathe its perfume; she tends it faithfully, calls it "sister," and on one occasion "threw open her arms, as with a passionate ardor, and drew its branches into an intimate embrace—so intimate that her features were hidden in its leafy bosom and her glistening ringlets all intermingled with the flowers."[18] If she is the shrub, however, she is also the fountain. "Her spirit gushed out before [Giovanni] like a fresh rill that was just catching its first glimpse of the sunlight";[19] she has a "rich voice that came forth . . . like a gush of music."[20] In the climactic scene Giovanni stamps angrily out to meet her, "but with her actual presence there came . . . recollections of many a holy and passionate outgush of her heart, when the pure fountain had been unsealed from its depths."[21]

Such is the nature of humanity. Beatrice has a blemish which has been transmitted to her and which is an essential part of her nature. But if she is scarred, she is not crippled: there is always the pure spirit within her which controls the motion of her heart and which Beatrice regards as her essential self. This is the spirit which at the end of the story is able, in keeping with the tradition to transcend her physical flaws and triumph over death.

This traditional element of the inherited sin which must be overcome is important to the denouement of the story and to the background against which the story is set. It is not as important, however, as the more complex problem of the sins which surround the love story proper. Dr. Rappaccini is guilty of manipulating human beings to satisfy his own experiments. Just as he has altered the nature of plants, so he has altered the natures of Beatrice and Giovanni. One cannot overlook the seriousness of the offense, and one can credit Baglioni's words that Rappaccini "would sacri-

[17]"Rappaccini," p. 269.
[18]"Rappaccini," p. 276.
[19]"Rappaccini," p. 285.
[20]"Rappaccini," p. 278.
[21]"Rappaccini," p. 294.

fice human life, his own among the rest, or whatever else was dearest to him"[22] to add to the store of medical knowledge.

But the matter of Rappaccini's guilt is not as one-dimensional as that. For one thing he is capable, according to our quotation, of sacrificing his own life. For another, he "has as much science as any member of the faculty . . . or all Italy,"[23] and he tampers with nature not for sport but because he believes "that all medicinal virtues are contained within those substances which we call vegetable poison."[24] Even one as jealous as Baglioni admits that Rappaccini occasionally "has effected, or seemed to effect, a marvelous cure."[25] Giovanni asks: "Are there many men capable of so spiritual a love of science?"[26] Rappaccini himself is amazed in the final scene when he learns that Beatrice is displeased with him for having secured her a mate she can love. He believed that in her loneliness she would be grateful to him for the favor he has so freely offered, and he can't quite understand her grief. The other characters may find his philosophy difficult to accept, but he does not, and his belief colors the morality of his action.

Hawthorne himself keeps changing Rappaccini's image. The first time we see Rappaccini he is cultivating his garden, and the narrator asks: "And this man . . . was he Adam?"[27] The identification fits. Beatrice is his daughter, and she has received her poison from him. The next time Rappaccini appears, however, he is much more closely associated with Satan. The traits most emphasized are his extreme thinness, his sallow hue—a hue that Hawthorne frequently associates with snakes—and his piercing and overwhelmingly active intellect, the trait most frequently associated with the angel who would not serve. It is also possible to see similarities between Rappaccini and God. Rappaccini did create the garden and people it with his two innocents. In the final scene Rappaccini resembles nothing so much as the priest giving his final blessing to his congregation: "As he drew near, the pale man of science seemed to gaze with a triumphant expression at the beautiful youth and maiden . . . He paused; his bent form grew erect with conscious power; he spread out his hands over them in the attitude of a father imploring a blessing on his children; but those were the same hands that had thrown poison into the stream of their lives."[28] One might not want to go so far as to suggest that it is God who has pol-

[22]"Rappaccini," p. 274.
[23]"Rappaccini," p. 273.
[24]"Rappaccini," p. 274.
[25]"Rappaccini," p. 274.
[26]"Rappaccini," p. 274.
[27]"Rappaccini," p. 271.
[28]"Rappaccini," pp. 297-98.

luted the flesh and caused the love affair to end in tragedy, but Hawthorne suggests the possibility that we ought at least to hesitate before totally condemning Rappaccini out of hand or before viewing him exclusively in unrelieved shades of black.

Giovanni is likewise well intentioned when he urges Beatrice to drink the antidote. "Might there not," he reasons, "be a hope of his returning within the limits of ordinary nature, and leading Beatrice, the redeemed Beatrice, by the hand?"[29] And later he asks: "Shall we not quaff [the antidote] together, and thus be purified from evil?"[30] A noble ambition, and one cannot doubt Giovanni's honesty. If it is true that his love was shallow and his language to Beatrice intemperate, it is also true that he is reacting to a situation not entirely of his own making. He has been weak on one level, but the strong Beatrice also has succumbed to her loneliness and admitted Giovanni into her garden. Now, however, she knows what he does not: that the poison has become an essential part of their natures and cannot be removed without destroying their very lives. But Giovanni, though ignorant, is at least zealous, and he believes he has the elixir that will make everything right once again. It is his zeal, not his ill will, which leads him to insist upon meddling with her, and in the process kill her.

There is a third man in the story—another scientist, Dr. Baglioni—and viewed in a certain way he is the most blameworthy of the lot. Certainly more ironies are associated with him than with any of the others. He has a personal and selfish axe to grind: Rappaccini is his professional rival, and his estimate of Rappaccini, though containing large elements of truth, is slanted and unfair. He is especially willing to discredit Rappaccini because it is rumored, as Baglioni says, that Rappaccini has"instructed [Beatrice] in his science, and that, young and beautiful as fame reports her, she is qualified to fill a professor's chair. Perhaps her father destines her for mine."[31] Thus when Baglioni decides that "it is too insufferable an impertinence in Rappaccini thus to snatch the lad out of my own hands,"[32] and when he comes to understand what has happened to Beatrice and Giovanni, he is only too happy to interfere by rushing forth with the antidote.

The whole host of ironies which follow are evident enough, but it is the irony of the last line of the story which is perhaps the most striking. As Beatrice sinks to the ground, Baglioni arrives on the scene, and the story ends: "Just at that moment Professor Baglioni

[29]"Rappaccini," p. 297.
[30]"Rappaccini," p. 297.
[31]"Rappaccini," p. 275.
[32]"Rappaccini," p. 281.

looked forth from the window and called loudly in a tone of triumph mixed with horror, to the thunderstricken man of science,—'Rappaccini! Rappaccini! and is *this* the upshot of your experiment!'[33] The reader, of course, is not entirely willing to accept Baglioni's judgment. First, it is Baglioni's antidote, not Rappaccini's poison, which has killed her. Second, Baglioni's emotional reaction—"triumph mixed with horror"—is not exactly what we would expect from a man of generous heart. Indeed, the vaccilation of his response is much more callous than the response of the "thunderstricken man of science." Nonetheless, although Baglioni's motives may not have been entirely noble, he was confident his action would have a good end. Certainly it was not his intention to kill Beatrice any more than it was Beatrice's intention to poison Giovanni.

Here is the moral tangle, then. A girl has been killed, and three men have been involved in the killing. Each of them is unquestionably guilty, yet each one has been acting in good faith. Except for Rappaccini's initial poisoning of Beatrice [which falls outside the story and is not directly related to the love affair], each one believes himself to have Beatrice's well-being in mind, and each one is trying to be of assistance to her. What, then, are we to conclude? Who is most to blame? Rappaccini? Giovanni? Baglioni? All of them? None of them? Is blame impossible to assign? Or to return to our earlier problems, is man to accept appearance or reality? Which will be more harmful in any given case? How can one know? Finally, who is responsible for sin? Adam? Satan? God?

Hawthorne, I think does not answer these questions. He has in certain instances made his inclinations clear, but they are seldom unqualified ones. The nature of God may be inscrutable, but the problems of mankind are not appreciably less complex or less susceptible to a variety of mutually exclusive solutions. Hawthorne's aesthetic, unlike Emerson's, does not permit him to offer answers. He is not confident that he sees with the eyes of Emerson's poet, and thus he cannot bring himself to make confident and absolute statements about the experiences of the world. "Rappaccini's Daughter," like most of Hawthorne's other fiction, does not offer a moral stance as its theme.

[33]"Rappaccini," p. 299.

The Yeats International Summer Course in 1970 will add a week to include lectures on James Joyce. The additional week will be separate. A request for information to Mrs. K. Moran, Secretary, Stephen Street, Sligo, will bring a brochure.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Maryland Council of Teachers of English TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."